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REAGAN'S PRESSURE POINTS

When not hypnotized by the nuances of the latest straw poll, the media have focused their campaign attention on "special interests." More precisely, they have focused on the Democratic Presidential hopefuls' various efforts to woo women, minorities, unions, teachers, and homosexuals. Walter Mondale in particular has drawn fire for the perception that he will cynically curry favor with any bloc that can deliver votes, regardless of what it asks in return. This characterization has by now congealed into conventional wisdom. Mr. Mondale protests that he has received unfair treatment, but the armchair analysts do have a point. There is a danger when pluralism goes on a stampede, bowling over the interests of both the individual and the public. All the more reason, then, to examine the record of the incumbent.

Oddly enough Ronald Reagan has escaped the criticism that he panders to pressure groups. The media tacitly accept the idea that it is the Democrats who must prove their ability to transcend special interests. Behind this notion lies the assumption that the President has the guts to stand up for the national interest when faced with the clamor of narrow constituencies. The assumption is wrong. Mr. Reagan's favored interests are very narrow indeed. The President has neither restrained government power nor resisted group power. On the contrary, he has used government to side with the big and the rich against the small and the poor. Because he prefers postures to policy, Mr. Reagan pretends he has revolutionized government in a compassionate way. Part actor, part reactor, the President is wholly deceptive, as a brief survey demonstrates.

Supply-side economics: Far from raising federal revenues and thereby reducing deficits, as the free-lunchers promised, Mr. Reagan's tax cuts have helped create by far the highest deficits ever. What's more, the long-overdue economic recovery owes its existence to the demand side (personal consumption rose by 18 percent between March and May). The Administration pulled the oldest Keynesian trick in the book: stifle inflation by inducing a recession. During the protracted slump, unemployment shot

up and small businesses suffered. As for the personal tax break for the rich, the extra money has likely gone to unproductive expenditures. Mr. Reagan shows no inclination to plug egregious tax loopholes. David Stockman's Trojan Horse rolls onward, deficits go upward, and scarcely a drop has trickled downward.

Energy: The Administration's energy policy—if that is not too dignified a term—has consistently supported subsidies for the flagging nuclear power industry and the fledgling synthetic fuels industry. Neither industry addresses long-term energy security, and both fob off excessive costs on consumers. As the tenth anniversary of the first OPEC oil shock approaches, America remains vulnerable to blackmail. Mr. Reagan has chosen to insulate huge multinationals instead of the homes of taxpayers. And to cut the deficit (see *Supply-side* above), he has tried to skimp on the strategic petroleum reserve.

Agriculture: Mr. Reagan's Agriculture Secretary, John Block, literally lives high on the hog—six thousand hogs at last tally, on his giant Illinois farm. Mr. Block's response to beleaguered small farmers has been to support disproportionate government assistance for large farmers. This Administration, like its predecessors, faces a myriad of special interests within the agriculture community. Its reaction has been imaginative: it has given in to all except the neediest. Mr. Block's food stamp policy adds injury to insult. Having slashed \$1.7 billion, he wants to cut another billion.

Environment and wilderness: The President's phalanx of conservatives against conservation has proved embarrassingly inept. Under Ann Burford the Environmental Protection Agency was so anxious to truckle to polluters that lobbying was unnecessary. Interior Secretary James Watt helped the President introduce a land "privatization" program because of its supposed appeal to business; now he has withdrawn the offer to sell off "excess" federal property because private business considers it unnecessary.

Transportation: The Administration's approach here is novel in that the powerful constituency to which it has succumbed happens to be a union. Transportation Secre-

tary Elizabeth Dole announced plans to introduce a "Phase II" trucking deregulation bill in May, to close the loopholes in the initial deregulation program passed by Congress in 1980. For fear of offending the Teamsters, the White House has shelved this sensible legislative initiative.

Industrial policy: Yes, Mr. Reagan does have an industrial policy, though he scorns the term when Democrats use it. The Administration's industrial policy consists of bowing to business in almost any context. Pressure from the steel industry or the motorcycle industry leads to tariffs and quotas. Pressure from the auto industry leads to loosening of driver safety standards. Pressure from the meat industry leads to support of easier inspection standards. Pressure from the securities industry leads to the removal of officials who keep too close an eye on Wall Street. Pressure from industry in general leads to lax enforcement of occupational safety rules. The President routinely coddles business against competitors and consumers. The "free market" takes care of the rest.

Defense spending: The pro-corporate contagion has so infected Pentagon officials that in making the world safe for capitalism they can no longer tell when they're being duped. The Administration not only bows to the military industry's monopolists, it kowtows. Steadfastly tolerant of cost overruns, Caspar Weinberger brooks the free-spending behavior of military contractors, and in the process often rewards industry for a job poorly done. The latest disclosures reveal that a claw hammer costs taxpayers \$435. Presumably Mr. Reagan can use this latest discovery to pound the Soviets into budgetary oblivion.

Miscellany: Would the staunchly conservative Administration push for rugged competition in health care policy? Not if it offended the American Medical Association and the insurance company lobbies. Would Mr. Reagan use his prestige and sterling pro-handgun credentials to oppose "cop-killer bullets"? Not if it offended the National Rifle Association. Would he take a stand for stronger enforcement of antitrust laws or against unproductive mergers? Not if it offended conglomerates and speculators.

The pattern that emerges suggests two interpretations. Perhaps the President means to stare down special interests, in which case he has proved pusillanimous. Or perhaps he means to assent to their every whim, in which case he is their prisoner. The Democratic candidates, busily attending to their own constituencies, have not managed to convey this valid and politically potent message. Democrats also must guard against the danger of pluralism run riot, a phenomenon this journal called "the new feudalism" during Jimmy Carter's tenure. Still, we wonder about what passes for "special interests" in the current lexicon. Columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak recently equated Mr. Mondale's "liberal activism" with "his intense public courtship of special-interest constituencies," such as his "extravagant promises to teacher lobbies." But why is the National Education Association so much more "special" than the National Rifle Association?

Part of the explanation for this curious inversion—

which forces the Democrats to justify their affinity for average Americans while somehow accepting Reagan's affinity for privileged Americans as natural—rests on the Administration's brilliant management of the media. The President has lately been chided by his conservative friends for awkwardly trying to appease liberal constituencies. But commentators rarely remark that "his intense public courtship" of big business and the rich, as Evans and Novak might phrase it, amounts to nothing more than pandering to special interests. Another part of the explanation involves the upturn of the business cycle, which does help everyone. Like St. Augustine praying to the Lord for chastity, but not yet, the Democrats have spent most of the last year praying for economic recovery, but not yet. Now that it has come, no honest liberal can lament its arrival. A liberal may, of course, condemn the Reagan Administration for its economic biases. Similarly, no honest conservative can argue that, say, minorities are less worthy of a President's solicitude than multinationals. A conservative may, of course, contend that neither minorities nor multinationals deserve special attention—in which case he should condemn the Reagan Administration for its economic biases.

As the election approaches, two failures mar the political landscape. The Republican Administration has failed to free itself from the grip of special interests. And the Democratic opposition has failed to make the Republican failure plain. Mr. Reagan will probably not surmount his failure: He has a sincere aversion to offending society's most fortunate strata. The task for the Democrats is to show that the President's good manners don't always make for good policy.

NOTEBOOK

□ THE POLISH GOVERNMENT has announced the lifting of martial law, but not many have been taken in. General Jaruzelski took the precaution of writing into statute the repressions of martial law, including a provision making membership in Solidarity punishable by three years' imprisonment. The most important Solidarity leaders will not be freed. In particular, the seven most prominent, who one report described as "incorrigible political organizers," will continue to languish in Polish jails. It's heartening that the Reagan Administration has not accepted this charade, and has not lifted sanctions against the Polish government in return for a bureaucratic dance. Nevertheless, democracies are never good at maintaining sanctions against anyone. It's only a matter of time before voices are heard remarking on the "normalization" of Poland, and asking why the United States doesn't concede that Jaruzelski has won the day. We hope the response will be: He may have indeed have won the day, but the United States is not required to reward such victories.